

Why the BNP are right

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I was giving my [theory of networked political communications](#) to a group of Dutch lobbyists when someone asked a rather awkward but important question.

I had been suggesting that we are in a new paradigm of political communications in Britain where bloggers, campaigning websites, mainstream media, and political party online messaging is creating a new networked political media. I even used [my parable of the Cadbury gorilla](#).

If you look at the recent big political media events: David Davis's resignation; McBride and Guido; and the Telegraph and MPs expenses; they all involve a much more complex and fast-moving networked dynamic that brings new levels of interactivity, connectivity and instability to the political communications process.

In this environment, I argued, it pays to be transparent, open, interactive and to listen as well as talk to the public. So Downing Street got it wrong with the Brown YouTube video (and arguably with the No 10 Petition website) because it used new media but it did it in the old top-down, talking to you way.

It is a view shared, for example, by PR giant [Richard Edelman](#).

Now what about the BNP and my Dutch guests?

Well we might worry about the BNP but the lovely, tolerant, liberal Dutch have arguably got a much worse problem with overtly racist politicians in their legislature. [Geert Wilders' right wing Freedom Party](#) (PVV) got 17% of the vote and has four MPs. They have a less violent history than the BNP and fewer associations with outright fascist ideology but their policies are at least as extreme.

And as one of my Dutch guests said, they have become very popular without being at all networked. So where does that leave networked political communications? why bother?

These right-wing extremists have become popular in the digital age despite being very untransparent and non-interactive. There is no wiki where you can contribute to BNP policy formulation (if for some bizarre reason you might want to). The PVV in Holland, likewise, have got into power with a simple old-fashioned message of fear and loathing transmitted via traditional platforms and conventional campaign techniques.

In that sense, both the BNP and the PVV have got digital communications right. They have understood that however vile and nonsensical their policies and beliefs are, they are shared by a significant proportion of the population. People know very well that these people are racist and still vote for them. It is because they are angry and these parties articulate that anger in a way that releases all sorts of pent-up frustrations. They remind us that the biggest asset in politics today is authenticity.

You can use all the new media technology in the world. You can use all the online platforms available. You can be interactive and socially networked. But if you do not have a clear, authentic platform of real policies that address the politics of the real world, then you might as well pack up your laptop and give in to the extremists.

Democracy is a complicated business and hard work. We need democratic politicians because they are the suspension system for the vehicle of state. They are the shock absorbers between our ideals and the reality of compromise. Democracy in the digital age is even more complex.

But there are no short cuts. If political communications is to repair the distrust, disconnect and disgust that people feel about our politics then it has to adopt a more networked relationship with the media and the people.

In the short term, nasty parties with stupid policies will be able to take advantage of the failure of mainstream politics (and mainstream media) to connect with the people.

In the long-term the only answer is to repair the political system, or rather come up with one fit for the digital age. The route to more participatory politics is via more participatory political communications. Not everyone need become active but we can't afford to leave so many people outside of the debate.

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